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Science and Security

Whatever hopes may have been raised by the success of Israel's U.S.-built military equipment over Syria's Soviet arms, London's International Institute for Strategic Studies contends the Soviets are closing the military technology gap. The only good thing we can find to say about this is that American scientists are apparently beginning to take the issue seriously.

The disturbing thing about the Soviet gains is that some of them apparently have been made through overt and legal means. Ball bearing machines that enabled improved missile accuracy were simply purchased several years ago. And the Pentagon has been complaining for months now about information traded away through scientific exchanges.

The Reagan administration is trying to clamp down on technology transfers of military significance to the Soviet Union. It has beefed up counterespionage and lengthened the list of proscribed technology exports. It is also trying to reduce the exchange of sensitive information between American and Soviet scientists. This latter effort initially met with considerable backlash from American scientists, who relish an open dialogue with foreign colleagues.

But now the National Academy of Sciences has assessed the problem and offers considerable support for the administration. "There has been a substantial transfer of U.S. technology—much of it directly relevant to military systems—to the Soviet Union from diverse sources," it says in a report published last week.

"The Soviet Union," the report notes, "is exploiting U.S.-U.S.S.R.

exchange programs by giving intelligence assignments to some of its participating nationals." The academy also warns that as more university scientists expand their work into technologies with military relevance, "the university campus will come to be viewed as a place providing much better opportunities for the illegal acquisition of technology."

The NAS report lists several ways the government could further restrict the flow of sensitive information to the Soviet Union, including tighter classification of scientific data of military relevance and better screening of scientists coming to the U.S. But it also says that the U.S. might have to pay a price for such a reduction in scientific exchange. "With respect to U.S. military and economic progress, controls may slow the rate of scientific advance and thus reduce the rate of technological innovation."

While it may be true that improved security will create domestic inhibitions, we doubt that much will be lost from retaliatory efforts the Soviets might make. The NAS concedes that there has been a "net flow" from the U.S. to the U.S.S.R. and other analyses have concluded that the U.S. has obtained very little useful scientific information in these exchanges. Indeed, there is evidence that the Soviets deliberately tried to delay the U.S. space program by providing false information in the 1960s suggesting that space travel was dangerous to human health.

If the gap in military technology has been nearly closed, it is no small matter. But if American scientists are awakening to the risks this entails, we at least are making progress of a sort.